

Columbia Flier

Elkridge site for CSX railroad facility panned once again

At latest meeting, county executive joins critics of proposed location

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In an attempt to collect feedback from residents on a proposed Elkridge location for the CSX Corp. intermodal railroad facility, the Maryland Department of Transportation and CSX held an informational workshop Wednesday night at Elkridge Landing Middle School.

The 200 residents who attended the meeting were more than willing to provide that feedback — all of it negative.

Seats at the four long tables in the middle of the school's gym, where comment cards and collection boxes were placed, remained filled for much of the two-hour meeting, in part due to a coordinated effort by the Greater Elkridge Community Association to make members' disapproval of the site known.

"Our goal tonight is to present them with as many questions as possible that they have to answer," said Howard Johnson, the group's president, who added that the group had emailed question topics to its members prior to the event.

Elkridge is one of four locations CSX is considering for the facility, where large containers will be transferred from trucks to trains for distribution throughout the country. The others are in Jessup, Anne Arundel County and Prince George's County.

Wednesday's workshop was staffed by 30 employees of MDOT and CSX, who manned dozens of poster boards around the gym that outlined the four potential sites, the state's need for the facility and the regulated process that will take place in building it.

A steady stream of residents shot questions at the staff members before heading to the comment tables to scribble down their thoughts, a "give and take" that MDOT was hoping for, said Jack Cahalan, a spokesman for the department.

"It's a free-wheeling kind of thing. That's the beauty of a workshop," said Cahalan.

"It's very productive because what (residents) are able to do is say, 'Hey, I live right here, and this is how this is going to affect me,'" he said.

Previous workshops elsewhere have also drawn large crowds, though not as large as the crowd Wednesday night, Cahalan said.

Residents invariably spoke against the site at the workshop, just as they did last week at a Greater Elkridge Community Association meeting with elected officials.

"We'll be seeing the lights, the noise, the commotion," said Jackie Amato, a more than 20-year resident of Bakers Place, near the proposed site. "We're going to have it right in our window."

When she first heard about the proposed project, Amato said she felt "deja vu."

She and her husband Glenn were pushed out of their last home in Ellicott City when Route 100 was being built, she said, and although she intends to fight the CSX facility from coming into Elkridge, she has little hope of winning and is scared of what the facility will do to her current home's value.

"We're thinking about retirement, and this is going to impact the value of our home," she said.

Doug Kornreich, a resident of Adcock Lane, said CSX should have considered the number of nearby homes in the area before narrowing the list of potential sites to four.

He is also upset that residents in other parts of Howard County aren't supporting Elkridge, even though the facility will cost the county money in maintaining local roads around the site, health costs for residents affected by pollution and school costs if the intermodal facility forces the county school board to cancel a proposed elementary school in the area, he said.

"We've had trouble getting people in other parts of Howard County to care," he said. "All of Howard County really does need to be concerned about where they're siting this."

The county school board is scheduled to discuss the CSX site at its regular meeting Thursday.

Also in the crowd were a few elected officials and David Nitkin, an aide to County Executive Kenneth Ulman.

At last week's community association meeting, Nitkin was criticized for giving a noncommittal answer on Ulman's stance, especially in light of the universal opposition voiced by other local elected officials. But Nitkin had more to say about the county executive's unease with the Elkridge site on Wednesday night.

While Ulman thinks the intermodal facility is a "good project" in general, he has concerns that "the effects of putting it in Elkridge could not be overcome," Nitkin said.

"His administration is actively looking at what improvements can be made at other locations, specifically at Montevideo Road (in Jessup), to see if the project can be moved there," Nitkin said. "He has a really hard time seeing how Elkridge can be the preferred solution."

Officials with MDOT and CSX will likely meet with officials from the Federal Railroad Administration in the next month to collectively determine which of the four sites will be put through the National Environmental Policy Act process for vetting sites based on a variety of criteria, Cahalan said.

It is also possible that all four sites will go through the NEPA process, which will likely begin in June, he said.